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ABSTRACT

For a number of years, studies have reported that people with disabilities have lower work force participation rates than the general public. One factor may be a lack of transitional, vocational programs for young people with disabilities. This digest describes "Thresholds," a career development program created with a basis on the unique characteristics and needs of disabled students. The Canadian program facilitates self-understanding, career understanding, decision-making, and self-advocacy, focusing on young people who have just begun exploring the world of work and their future in it. The program is divided into three parts: (1) self-evaluation and communication, along with an examination of how others with disabilities have succeeded in moving from school to a career; (2) exploring the world of work; and (3) examining barriers to success. The program includes 12 sessions of 80 minutes each, and consists of both group and individual activities. Desirable characteristics of facilitators are listed, followed by a description of field testing of the program in two urban settings. (RB)

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Career Counseling for Young People with Physical Disabilities: An Introduction to *Thresholds*: ERIC Digest

by M. Jamieson & J. Paterson

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Career Counseling For Young People With Physical Disabilities: An Introduction To *Thresholds*

M. Jamieson & J. Paterson

Overview

For a number of years, studies have reported that people with disabilities have lower work force participation rates than the general public (Siegel, Robert, Waxman, & Gaylord-Ross, 1992). Since work is highly valued in our society, scholars have been interested in determining why this is so. They have suggested that one factor is a lack of transitional, vocational programs for young people with disabilities and experts have recommended creating programs based on the unique characteristics and needs of the target population. *Thresholds* is one such program, developed to meet the transitional and vocational needs of young people with physical disabilities.

Discussion

Before leaving high school and entering the world of work or other post-secondary settings, young people with physical disabilities must master a number of career developmental tasks in relation to their disabilities. Practitioners and researchers have suggested that many aspects of Super's "life-career rainbow" are applicable to young people with disabilities (Hershenson & Szymanski, 1992). Super (1990) has combined situational and personal determinants with life-roles and life-stages to explain career development across the life-span. During the school-to-work transition, most young people have entered Super's exploration stage, which fosters the exploration of personal characteristics and career opportunities. As career opportunities and realities are clarified, young people make tentative career selections, test them through fantasy, discussions, and/or work experiences, and consider them as possible life-roles.

Many potential barriers exist for young people with disabilities (Karge, Patton, & de la Garza, 1992; Marlett, 1987; Roessler, Brolin, & Johnson, 1992). For example, these young people may not obtain the same amount or variety of pre-vocational work experiences; they may lack training in basic skills such as job search, job maintenance, mobility/transportation, and self-advocacy skills; schools and other career counseling agencies may lack specialized personnel; society may have lower performance expectations for them. Unless vocational programs incorporate activities that examine the concept of disability, and the accompanying barriers, they will not prepare people with disabilities to enter and succeed in the work world.

Thresholds

Thresholds (Jamieson, Paterson, Krupa, MacEachen, & Topping, 1993) is designed to enhance career development for young people with physical disabilities. Physical disability is defined as a restriction to perform communication, personal care, locomotor and/or bodily activities in a manner or within the range considered normal for a person (World Health Organization, 1980). The severity of the restriction produces observable performance difficulties, which may be augmented by aids, appliances, and/or another person. *Thresholds* is intended for qualified facilitators working with 15-18 year old adolescents with physical disabilities, who have just begun exploring who they are and how they fit into the world of work. This program provides an initial step to career exploration— it is not a job search.

Thresholds: The Program

Thresholds has three parts: In Part A, participants reflect on their interests, capabilities, and values, and then practice communicating these personal characteristics to others. In addition, they examine ways in which people with disabilities have successfully bridged the gap between school and career. In Part B, young people explore the world of work. They formulate questions to investigate specific careers, determine if these careers meet their personal needs and directions, test their questions in a mock interview, refine them, and try them out in a formal interview. In Part C, participants examine barriers to career success. They identify their own barriers and contemplate strategies to overcome them. They also consider ways in which other people with disabilities have confronted career barriers. Finally, they revise their personal plans for addressing barriers and formalize action plans to achieve their career goals.

Thresholds includes 12 sessions of 80 minutes each and consists of group and individual activities. The facilitator, who may be a teacher, career counselor, occupational therapist, or social worker, leads the participants through the activities. The program is detailed in a facilitator's

guide and a participant's handbook (grade 7 reading level).

Facilitator Characteristics

In order to implement *Thresholds* successfully, facilitators require a number of attributes. Consider the following points:

- People with disabilities often face barriers that negatively affect their self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Recognizing the true potential of persons with disabilities and appreciating the possible effects of frequent, negative experiences can help to minimize the impact.
- Counselor attitudes can influence their clients. Examining personal and professional attitudes towards disability and persons with disabilities could benefit facilitators.
- Over the last two or three decades, persons with disabilities have challenged society's perceptions of them. The challenges have encouraged members of society to change their attitudes and expectations. Facilitators should be aware of this history and be sensitive to the need for further social action.
- Participation of people with disabilities in the labor force is low. Therefore, knowledge both of the realities of the world of work and the factors that influence young people with physical disabilities is important.

Field Testing

Thresholds was based on a needs assessment and was field tested in two urban settings. In the first field test, a social worker and a vocational counselor guided three males and five females (ages 14-18) through the program. In the second test, two career counselors worked with 10 males (ages 15-18). Pretest-posttest differences in the first setting showed a significant improvement in vocational decision-making abilities. In the second setting, significant improvements in vocational decision-making abilities and self-appraisal skills were also observed. Participants in the first test had a poor understanding of career decision-making strategies, but a good understanding of who they were prior to entering the program. In the second setting, participants had limited understandings in both areas. Therefore, the initial characteristics of the participants seemed critical in determining whether or not notable improvement would occur.

Conclusion

Thresholds is a transitional, vocational program for young people with physical disabilities which facilitates self-understanding, career understanding, decision-making, and self-advocacy. Its focus is on young people who have just begun exploring the world of work and their future in it. Field tests confirm its value as a career development program. *Thresholds*, together with other vocational programs, should help young people with physical disabilities develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to participate successfully in the work force.

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